Reframing the evidence debates: a view from the media for development sector

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Introduction

Donors, policy-makers and practitioners need evidence[1] to inform their policy and programming choices, resource allocation and spending decisions, yet producing and making use of high-quality research and evidence is not straightforward. This is particularly the case in sectors that do not have a long history of research or evaluation, that are operating in fragile states with low research capacity and that are trying to bring about complex change. The media for development sector (see Box 1) is one such example. Nonetheless, donors, governments and private foundations working in international development have long recognised the importance of independent media and information sources in their work and the role that communication can play in bringing about change. Despite this recognition, however, in debates around evidence on the role of media and communication in achieving development outcomes, assertions of "no evidence" or "not enough evidence" are commonplace. With the evidence agenda gaining more prominence in the development sector, there is a risk for any sector that finds it difficult to have a clear, concise and cohesive narrative around its evidence of impact.

This paper is based on a series of interviews with practitioners, evaluators and donors working in the media for development sector, and looks at their understanding of what counts as evidence and their views on the existing evidence base. It argues that *compelling evidence of impact does exist and is being used* – although this varies by thematic area. For example, it highlights that evidence in the area of health communication is stronger and more integrated into practice compared with other thematic areas such as media and governance or humanitarian response outcomes. The paper also contends that, alongside evidencing development outcomes (for example, media's impact on knowledge, attitudes, efficacy, norms and behaviours), more evidence is needed to answer specific questions about how, why and in what ways media and communication affect people and societies – and how this varies by local context.

> **Box 1: What is media for development?**
> Media for development refers to the use of media and communication to facilitate development outcomes (sometimes called development communications). Techniques include information dissemination and education, behaviour change communication, social marketing, social mobilisation, communication for social change and community participation, and creating platforms for dialogue and debate. This paper focuses on evidence from media for development and does not cover media development. Media development involves the capacity strengthening for institutions and individuals to support the development of a free, independent and plural media. Despite this differentiation, it is important to recognise that in practice many media for development interventions incorporate aspects of media development and capacity strengthening.

Figure 1 (left): A scene from Soul City's television drama which uses entertainment education to inform the public, raise debate and shift attitudes and behaviours around key health and development concerns.

Figure 2 (right): BBC Media Action's Sema Kenya (Kenya speaks) an interactive radio and television discussion programme. It combines a live audience and a panel to bring people and their leaders closer together to enhance accountability.

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[1] The term "evidence" in the context of this paper is largely referring to evidence of impact. However, evidence can include evidence of need (such as people's information and communication needs) or evidence of why (why the situation is the way it is).

The paper argues that the lack of clear evidential standards for reporting evidence from media for development programmes, the limited efforts to date to collate and systematically review the evidence that does exist, and the lack of relevant fora in which to critique and understand evaluation findings, are significant barriers to evidence generation. The paper calls for an "evidence agenda", which creates shared evidential standards to systematically map the existing evidence, establishes fora to discuss and share existing evidence, and uses strategic, longer-term collaborative investment in evaluation to highlight where evidence gaps need to be filled in order to build the evidence base. Without such an agenda, as a field, we risk evidence producers, assessors and funders talking at cross purposes.

To explore the question of what constitutes evidence in media for development, BBC Media Action undertook a series of in-depth interviews with a range of practitioners[2] including: Soul City Institute for Health & Development Communication (Soul City), Search for Common Ground (SFCG), Johns Hopkins University Center for Communication Programs (JHU·CCP), Internews, Fondation Hirondelle/Hirondelle USA, Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA) Population Services International (PSI), as well as colleagues at BBC Media Action, donors, academics and evaluation experts.[3] The interviews look at how evidence is conceived and collate the best examples of evidence privileged by the interviewees. They also explore the perceived challenges and opportunities for building the evidence base of the sector.

The paper is not a comprehensive review of the evidence in this sector, nor does it claim to represent the broader base for the sector. Instead, it is designed to illustrate what evidence is being used in practice, how and why, and to highlight what is required to move the media for communication evidence base forward.

The paper is divided into five sections. In Section 1, Philip Davies, Head of International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) in London, presents an analysis of the current debates in evidence. Section 2 focuses on where the sector believes there is evidence and where we have gaps. It highlights interviewees' theories and models of the role of media and communications in social and behaviour change and their best examples of impact evidence. Section 3 focuses on people's identification of the importance of evidencing both the direct and indirect outcomes from media and communication interventions. Section 4 focuses on the challenges around evidence generation in the sector. Section 5 introduces the steps to building an evidence agenda going forward. The paper concludes with the main arguments for why an evidence agenda is critical to strengthening the evidence base around media and communication in development. To do justice to the generous time given by the interviewees, the accompanying appendices contain further information detailing the richness of the interviews, including the complete list of evidence examples cited in Section 2. Readers may find these examples useful for more technical conversations.

The intended audience of this working paper is those responsible for the design, delivery, funding or evaluation of media in development projects. This includes donors, practitioners, academics and evaluators. While research and evaluation may be the preserve of a smaller group of individuals

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[2] Some practitioner organisations, for example Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), Internews and Fondation Hirondelle/Hirondelle USA, largely work on media development/media assistance rather than media for development/development communications.

[3] See Appendix 1 for a full list of contributors.

within these groups or organisations, this paper is intended to be accessible to all those involved in media for development programmes. It may also be of interest to those working in international development and public policy more widely.

The paper aims to be used as the start of a sectorial conversation to inform an evidence agenda – without which we risk failing to properly understand and represent the best evidence that does exist in the field. The ultimate risk is that policy-makers and donors, despite recognising the value of media for development, sideline it in favour of other investment approaches with established evidence bases.

1. What is evidence? An expert view

Box 2: Evidence of what?

"Research and evaluation generates the evidence required by public officials and civil servants to make informed judgements about how to design and implement policy, and how to spend scarce financial resources" (DFID, *How to Note: Assessing the Strength of Evidence*, 2014).

Research, monitoring and evaluation are used to gather different types of evidence which might usefully be considered as follows:

- Evidence of need – generally identified through formative or exploratory research
- Evidence of why – evidence that seeks to understand why the situation is as it is
- Evidence of impact – generally identified through monitoring and summative evaluation

What constitutes evidence is currently subject to intense debate within the international development community. These "evidence debates" have been accompanied by commentary, conferences and blogs,[4] as well as donor guidance and initiatives on evidence and evaluation.[5] In order to situate this paper in the context of the wider evidence debates, we invited Dr Philip Davies, Head of International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie)[6] London, to outline the field of evidence for policy and practice in international development, and social and public policy interventions more broadly. He provides an expert view – as the former director of the Government Social Research Service, academic, and currently a development practitioner – on what a sound and broad evidence base looks like.

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[4] Examples include World Bank and Oxfam blogs (see http://blogs.worldbank.org/publicsphere/have-evidence-will-um-erm-2-2 and http://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/the-evidence-debate-continues-chris-whitty-and-stefan-dercon-respond/) and the 2013 Politics of Evidence: Big Push Forward conference in the UK: https://www.ids.ac.uk/events/politics-of-evidence-conference.
[5] Examples include DFID's *How to Note: Assessing the Strength of Evidence*, as well as their call for the development of a Centre for Excellence in Impact Evaluation of International Development.
[6] 3ie is a US non-profit organisation with an office in Washington, and programmes operating in Delhi and London under the auspices of the Global Development Network and London International Development Centre respectively 3ie funds impact evaluations and systematic reviews that generate evidence on what works in development programmes and why. They are supported by international development donors such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the UK's Department for International Development (DFID).

Evaluation in policy and practice by Philip Davies, 3ie

Over the past three decades or so evidence-based decision-making has been a guiding principle of public policy and public service delivery worldwide. Having been initially developed in the fields of medicine and health care, evidence-based decision-making has become a key feature of policy and practice in education, social welfare, crime and justice, agriculture, environmental policy, mass media and communications, international development and many other sectors.

Different notions of evidence

Evidence clearly means different things to different people across a range of contexts. In the academic community there are two prominent paradigms of social science, each of which has its own notions of evidence. One paradigm (the positivist tradition) sees evidence as the findings from surveys, experimental or quasi-experimental studies that support, or reject, a conclusion. Such evidence consists of quantitative measures such as effect sizes, percentage differences and data about variance. These measures serve as proof, or lack of proof, that a hypothesis is valid, or that an anticipated outcome has been achieved other than by chance. The criteria for determining the quality of evidence for positivists are the internal and external validity of the findings and of the methodological procedures by which these findings were gathered, analysed and reported. This, in turn, purports to provide evidence of the generalisability of findings across total populations.

The other prominent paradigm that informs academic notions of evidence is based on a phenomenological and naturalistic perspective. This seeks to understand the processes by which policies and programmes are developed, implemented and reviewed, as well as the subjective meanings, experiences and viewpoints of different groups of people outside of controlled conditions. Such evidence uses mainly qualitative methods of inquiry, such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, consultative methods, observational and participant-observational studies, ethnography, documentary analysis, oral history and case studies. This approach sees evidence as particularistic and contextually specific rather than generalisable. The criteria for determining the quality of evidence for qualitative researchers are its coherence, defensibility, credibility and consistency (Spencer et al., 2003), rather than its validity and reliability.

Other notions of evidence prevail outside of the academic context. Lomas and his colleagues (Lomas et al., 2005) found that, while researchers and analysts see evidence in terms of scientific proof, as something based on sound theory and the appropriate caveats, policy-makers view evidence as something that tells a story, and consider it to be anything that seems reasonable, is policy-relevant and gives a clear message.

A study of what UK civil servants understand by evidence, and how they use it (Campbell et al., 2007), revealed a broad range of types and sources of evidence. These included qualitative, quantitative and economic evidence derived from surveys, census data, administrative data, cost–benefit analysis, experimental studies and policy pilots. Sources of evidence included special advisers[7], substantive and scientific experts, professional associations, think tanks and opinion-formers, lobbyists, pressure groups, the media, and constituents, consumers and users of public services.

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[7] A special adviser works in a supporting role to the British government. With media, political or policy expertise, their role is to assist and advise government ministers.

Some of these sources of evidence are based on sound research and evaluation findings, while others are not. This reflects the UK civil servants' willingness to accept anecdotal evidence and public opinion data that, they said, could illustrate and help policy-makers to understand how policies have been received locally. Anecdotal evidence includes "real-life stories", "fingers in the wind", "local" and "bottom-up" evidence. Such evidence "was helpful in presenting policies to Ministers and to the wider public; it served to contextualise and humanise statistical evidence and provided a 'real-world' element that people could relate to, in comparison to the more inaccessible scientific or technical evidence" (Campbell et al., 2007, p. 22).

Evidence, then, is not definitive but is tentative, perspectival and contested. Further, evidence is seldom, if ever, self-evident. Evidence does not tell people what to do or how to act. It can give direction, guidance and empirically based probability about the likelihood of some outcome(s) being achieved. The meaning and significance of evidence for decision-making depends on how it is interpreted in light of the experience, expertise and judgement of people who use it (Davies, 1994).

Types of evaluation

Within the academic and research community the development of evidence-based policy and practice has also opened up the long-running paradigm wars over the types of evaluation that are most appropriate for decision-making. This usually reflects the different notions of what constitutes evidence. Researchers who have expertise in quantitative, experimental and quasi-experimental designs tend to focus on impact (or summative) evaluation, claiming (quite rightly) that these methods provide the most valid, reliable and precise estimates of the relative effectiveness of one policy option or programme strategy compared with another. Researchers with qualitative research experience tend to focus more on formative (or process) evaluation, using the full range of qualitative methods mentioned above. The distinction between these two broad types of evaluation, however, is by no means absolute, and they are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, evaluations for policy and practice almost always require both approaches which, when combined with a theory of change analysis and economic appraisal methods, provide a powerful mixed-methods approach to evaluation.

Some researchers have suggested that there is a "hierarchy of evidence" (Sackett et al., 1997; Guyatt et al., 2000; Leigh, 2009), which gives greater status to quantitative and experimental/quasi-experimental evaluation over and above qualitative and naturalistic methods of inquiry. This view is mistaken. It fails to appreciate that the most appropriate type of evaluation depends on the policy or practice question that is being asked. For questions that ask about people's experiences or understanding of policy interventions, in-depth interview studies, focus group analysis and ethnographic inquiry are clearly superior to experimental/quasi-experimental methods. Questions about the impact of a policy initiative or intervention approach, as compared with other options, will be better answered with evidence that is based on experimental or quasi-experimental studies.

"Randomised trials are very useful for a small subset of questions. They are moderately useful for a slightly wider one and they are completely pointless for quite a large number of very important questions – to which we can find some degree of evidential basis of the evidence of our impact."

Prof Chris Whitty, Chief Scientific Adviser and Director of Research & Evidence, DFID speaking at the Steps Centre Annual Symposium, 2013.

Questions about the effectiveness of implementation and delivery mechanisms usually require a combination of experimental and qualitative evaluation methods. Questions about the costs, cost-effectiveness and cost–benefits of policies require economic appraisal methods, which can draw upon quantitative, experimental, quasi-experimental and qualitative evidence. Questions about the existing evidence base of a policy or practice issue will be best answered using research synthesis studies such as systematic reviews, statistical meta-analyses, rapid evidence assessments, evidence maps, gap maps and qualitative synthesis. All of these methods of evaluation can be used to understand the theory of change of a policy or intervention area.

A theory of change asks the questions "how is the policy or intervention supposed to work?" and "what inputs, activities, mechanisms, people and resources have to be in place for the policy to be effective?" (Pawson, 2002; Patton, 2008; and White, 2009). A theory of change (sometimes referred to as a "program theory" in the United States) analysis also tries to establish a causal sequence by which the constituent elements of a policy or intervention work to bring about successful delivery and outcomes. This causal chain may not be linear and may operate at different levels of intervention (individual, social, community, environmental). Consequently, a theory of change needs to understand conceptually and empirically the regular and irregular ways in which the causal chain operates in different contexts and at different levels of intervention (micro, meso, macro). Such analysis primarily needs to use qualitative and formative methods of evaluation followed by, or interspersed with, quantitative and economic methods. Systematic reviews also need to be examined in developing a theory of change to establish what is already known about the nature, size and dynamics of the issue in hand, and about the causal processes underlying successful (and unsuccessful) interventions.

Systematic reviews have the advantage over single evaluations in that they provide the *overall balance of evidence* on whatever topic is requiring sound evidence. They do this by searching exhaustively for all the evidence on a topic over an extended period of time (usually 10 to 20 years),[8] separating the high-quality from the low-quality evidence, extracting and analysing the appropriate data rigorously and, thereby, attempting to "discover the consistencies and account for the variability in similar-appearing studies" (Cooper et al., 2009, p. 4). Systematic reviews have the advantage over single evaluations in that they provide evidence from more than one sample, context and time period, thereby providing a much broader and more robust evidence base for knowing what is generalisable and what is context specific. Sound evidence, then, requires a mixed-methods approach to research and evaluation.

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[8] Some systematic reviews can span longer time periods, particularly where less evaluation exists. For example, Naugle & Hornik's (2014) systematic review on the effectiveness of the mass media, featured in this paper spans evaluations produced over a period of 40 years.

Summary

Key points around evidence for policy and practice in international development, and social and public policy interventions more broadly (Philip Davies, 3ie), include:

- Evidence is not definitive. It is tentative, representative of different perspectives and contested.
- Evidence does not tell people what to do or how to act. It gives direction, guidance and insight into whether outcomes are being achieved.
- The meaning and significance of evidence for decision-making depends on how it is interpreted in light of the experience, expertise and judgement of people who use it.
- Mixed-methods research and evaluation based on a clear theory of change are most likely to offer the most robust evidence.
- Measuring impact does not necessarily require a randomised controlled trial.
- Many impact questions, particularly those which seek to understand how and why change happens, cannot be answered in purely quantitative ways. Some impact questions can only be measured qualitatively.

2. Evidence – what counts and where are there gaps?

Section 1 identified the contested nature of evidence creation, its interpretation and application, and the importance of a clear theory of change in evidence generation. This section builds on Section 1 by outlining the interviewees' views on the role of media and communication in development, and on the primacy of a socio-ecological framework when considering the social and behavioural change that media for development seeks to make. It then presents the examples of best evidence shared in the interviews. The section closes by highlighting where evidence gaps are seen to be the greatest.

Across the interviewees, media and communication was seen to be able to contribute to both individual and collective developmental outcomes, for example healthier behaviours, supportive social norms and increased civic participation. Box 3 outlines the main views articulated in the interviews about the role of media and communication in development.

Box 3: Media and communication in social and behavioural change

Broadly, four views of the media and communication in development were identified by practitioners across the interviews:

1. **Media as a democratic institution in its own right:** Media is seen as an intrinsically free, plural and independent institution which should exist in its own right and as a core component of democratic development. It provides balanced and impartial information.

2. **Media as a platform for enacting social life:** Media and communication can hold a mirror to society and reflect the real state of social life. Programmes can also provide a platform for dialogue and participation and enable people to communicate their needs, opinions and experiences – giving voice – and demand answers from power-holders.

Box 3: Media and communication in social and behavioural change

3. **Media as a social influencer and mediator of new knowledge:** Media and communication can provide and mediate new information and knowledge, imparting the information people need to make decisions, thereby shaping social norms and influencing behaviours. It can "normalise" specific behaviours by introducing or legitimising forms of behaviour that may otherwise be unknown or marginal. It can also "inspire" people and stimulate action by changing people's ways of viewing particular issues and highlighting, or even modelling, different ways of acting or behaving.

4. **Media as an actor representing roles and positions of the self and others in society**: Media can amplify and also restrict voices, knowingly or not, with the effect of creating a particular representation of society which differs from the reality (Toennesen et al., 2013). Media and communication can increase audiences' self-efficacy and impact on their identities, as well as their understanding of their role and the role of others in society. It can also question existing structures or representations in society, which may lead to subsequent changes.

People's use of media and communication is embedded within a range of influences at different levels (for example familial, community, society). Evaluating the effect of media and communication is not simple. Media and communication interventions cannot be meaningfully evaluated in isolation from their wider contexts and the social change processes which precede – and also outlive – them. As a result, a range of complementary evaluation approaches are needed.

The importance of a social-ecological perspective

Work in development communication has long included the perspective of the social context at its heart. There has also been a dominant paradigm in health communication literature that communication research should focus on collective and social perspectives, rather than simply focusing on individual decisions and practices (see Box 4). To give a holistic picture of any situation, research would therefore need to include elements designed to understand the social aspects as well as the behavioural aspects associated with communication within the local context.

In addition, media for development organisations, particularly those in the global south such as Soul City,

Box 4: Theoretical perspectives

In the introduction to their *Handbook of Global Health Communication*, Obregon and Waisbord (2012) describe the theoretical divides and convergences in the field of global health communication. The dominant paradigm, based on the work of many researchers such as Campbell and Jovchelovitch (2000), Bühler and Kohler (2002), Melkote et al., (2000), Airhihenbuwa et al., (2000) and Erni (2004) more recently and as far back as Rogers and Shoemaker (1971), makes the argument that communication research should be based on the collective problematisation of health and disease and cultural diversity, with these being foregrounded in the analysis, rather than being considered as another set of behavioural determinants that affect individual decision and practices.

This is in the context of much of global health communication and behavioural research arguably following a model of individual rational decision-making. For example, knowledge-behaviour gaps being premised on the notion that knowledge should lead to behaviour change. It is the assumption of individual rationality being a constant, which is questioned by Obregon and Waisbord (2012). Instead, they see "rationality as culturally defined according to social expectations, norms and attitudes". This is seen as fundamental to the health decision-making process that communication is trying to influence.

Oxfam's Straight Talk, Puntos de Encuentro, in addition to BBC Media Action, JHU·CCP and others, also draw on a social-ecological model in their media for development communication work. Many interviewees explicitly or implicitly talked about how they use this approach to understand the development problems they are trying to address and the effects of their work. They considered the complex interplay between individual, relationship, community and societal factors:

> "We tend to use the social-ecological framework that considers how individuals are nested within families and households, how households are nested within communities, how communities are nested within societies and how societies are nested within a global environment … we are keenly aware that barriers to individual behaviour, for example, often originate at higher levels of social aggregation. Ultimately, we are interested in changes in health status at the population level, but how you get there, which level of that ecological hierarchy you work through, will depend on the nature of the barriers and the changes needed."

> Douglas Storey, JHU·CCP

At the same time, practitioners and donors we spoke with acknowledged and flagged that media for development interventions often do not produce rapid, readily measurable and easily monetisable outcomes. This is particularly the case when compared with biomedical or supply side development interventions, such as building schools, conditional cash transfer or vaccination programmes. The social change which media for development aims to make is more incremental, less tangible and often not fixed (it evolves as people's needs evolve). Indicators of success, and impact, are seen by practitioners and evaluators alike to be harder to measure; the challenges of attribution and contribution in contexts where there are multiple complex influencing factors are also trickier.

> "Counterfactuals are hard in peacebuilding and media – trying to define what would have happened if the media wasn't there, is a challenge to answer."
>
> Lena Slachmuijlder, SFCG

> "In our fourth series [of Soul City] in 1999/2000, we did a range of different studies to do triangulation of the results because the point about evaluating media and social mobilisation is that it's complex and social change is complex, it's not just a linear process where you can say A led to B and B led to C and therefore that's the answer and so it is incredibly complex. And we started looking at different methodologies and how to integrate qualitative and quantitative, cost-effective analysis the series was evaluated in much more in depth as we had more money at that point."
>
> Sue Goldstein, Soul City

> "[Donors] also need to be able to accept that incremental dynamics are much more important than they are credited for. This is often overtaken by donor needs for quantifiable, short-term evidence. Donors' three- to four-year timelines are way out of sync with long-term incremental change. For example, while short-term health outcomes are important, they don't always contribute to the development of sustainable health systems. [We] have to do a better job at making a case for articulating steps towards sustainable systems; come together as a sector to defend this – incremental institutional change, not just numbers of mosquitoes caught in bed nets."
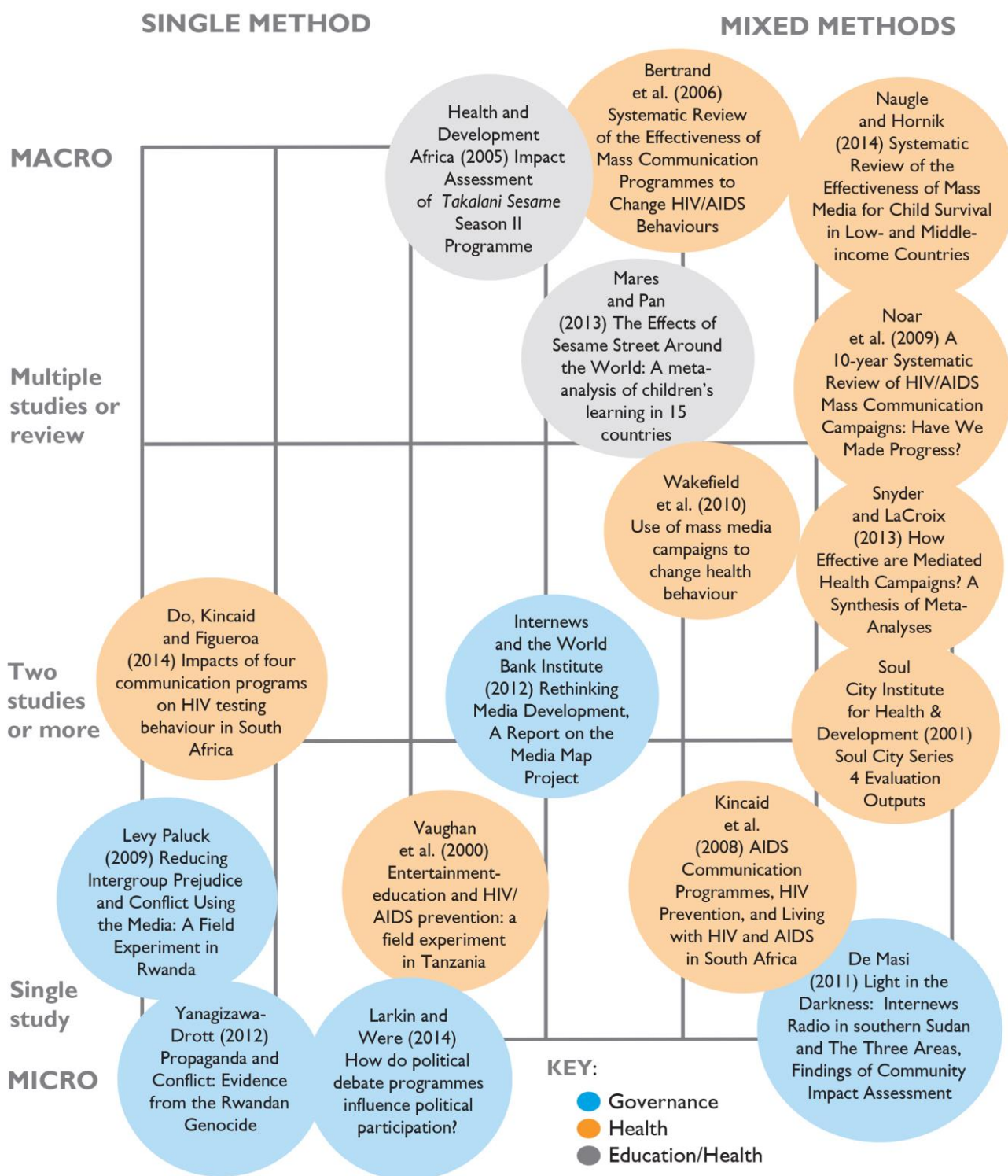
<div align="right">Mark Nelson, CIMA</div>

The challenge therefore is that, while practitioners and increasingly donors might "know" that media and communication matters for development, this is at times an implicit, patchily evidenced assumption that has to compete in crude terms with more readily measurable development outcomes. Despite these issues and challenges, the best examples cited below highlight the current evidence for the sector.

Best examples of evidence

Interviewees were asked to provide their best examples of evidence for the sector. This question was deliberately left open to allow respondents to determine the types of evidence they wanted to share. The overwhelming majority cited examples of evidence of impact, for example published project evaluations, peer-reviewed journal articles on project impact or systematic reviews. Very little "non-impact" evidence, for example evidence of need from formative research, was cited.

The top 16 examples of evidence cited by two or more interviewees are illustrated in Figure 2. The examples are mapped on two axes – the horizontal axis according to whether the evidence related to a single method or mixed methods, and the vertical axis according to whether the evidence involved a single study or multiple studies/a review. Examples in blue relate to governance-focused media for development interventions, those in orange relate to health communications and grey relate to education/health. A full annotated list of these examples can be found in Appendix 2. This appendix includes a description of the research and methodology, a list of people who cited it, any quotes about why it was cited and, where available, the timelines and costs associated with producing the evidence.

Figure 2: Examples of evidence cited in interviews mapped by type of study, method approach and theme[9]

SINGLE METHOD

MIXED METHODS

MACRO

Health and Development Africa (2005) Impact Assessment of *Takalani Sesame* Season II Programme

Bertrand et al. (2006) Systematic Review of the Effectiveness of Mass Communication Programmes to Change HIV/AIDS Behaviours

Naugle and Hornik (2014) Systematic Review of the Effectiveness of Mass Media for Child Survival in Low- and Middle-income Countries

Mares and Pan (2013) The Effects of Sesame Street Around the World: A meta-analysis of children's learning in 15 countries

Multiple studies or review

Noar et al. (2009) A 10-year Systematic Review of HIV/AIDS Mass Communication Campaigns: Have We Made Progress?

Wakefield et al. (2010) Use of mass media campaigns to change health behaviour

Snyder and LaCroix (2013) How Effective are Mediated Health Campaigns? A Synthesis of Meta-Analyses

Do, Kincaid and Figueroa (2014) Impacts of four communication programs on HIV testing behaviour in South Africa

Internews and the World Bank Institute (2012) Rethinking Media Development, A Report on the Media Map Project

Two studies or more

Soul City Institute for Health & Development (2001) Soul City Series 4 Evaluation Outputs

Levy Paluck (2009) Reducing Intergroup Prejudice and Conflict Using the Media: A Field Experiment in Rwanda

Vaughan et al. (2000) Entertainment-education and HIV/AIDS prevention: a field experiment in Tanzania

Kincaid et al. (2008) AIDS Communication Programmes, HIV Prevention, and Living with HIV and AIDS in South Africa

Single study

Yanagizawa-Drott (2012) Propaganda and Conflict: Evidence from the Rwandan Genocide

Larkin and Were (2014) How do political debate programmes influence political participation?

De Masi (2011) Light in the Darkness: Internews Radio in southern Sudan and The Three Areas, Findings of Community Impact Assessment

MICRO

KEY:
- 🔵 Governance
- 🟠 Health
- ⚫ Education/Health

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[9] The thematic areas covered in the examples given by interviewees focus heavily on the areas of governance and health; there were fewer citations of humanitarian response and resilience evidence. In part this is likely to be due to the areas of specialism among interviewees, and reflective of the particular challenges facing the latter two areas of work in relation to evidence gathering. This is also likely to be a function of BBC Media Action's own current thematic focus being on the areas of governance, health, resilience and humanitarian response. We recognise that had the interviewees focused on different thematic areas in media for development, for example women and girls or peacebuilding, the evidence examples being privileged would vary accordingly.

These examples are not an exhaustive or definitive list. They also cannot claim to represent the broader evidence base for the sector. Instead they serve to provide examples of the evidence that is being privileged by a small sample of practitioners, donors and policy-makers working within the sector. It was acknowledged by interviewees that these examples are not widely known among practitioners and donors and that bringing them together would be a useful contribution to sectorial learning. The examples also serve to rebuff claims that the sector is starting from a blank slate.

Overall, fewer meta-analyses or systematic reviews were cited compared with single evaluation studies, and health communication evidence is stronger[10] compared with other thematic areas such as media and governance or humanitarian response. This is perhaps not surprising because health communication has a longer history of evaluation. All the systematic reviews mentioned by interviewees emerged from health communications, except one on education/health. The reviews tended to focus on HIV and Aids or child survival, which have received more evaluation funding over the years:

> "From early on, some of USAID's[11] first mass media health initiatives such as the Mass Media Health Practice (MMHP) project which was done from 1978 to 1985 and the Healthcom (communication for child survival – from 1985 to 1990), they wanted to know how you could attribute behaviour changes to media and communication interventions. They pressed the implementation agencies – back then the Academy of Educational Development was the lead on the Healthcom project and they contracted out the evaluation [across approximately 12 of 18 countries] to [Professor] Bob Hornik at Annenberg School for Communication at Penn – to determine how we could attribute behaviour change, such as oral rehydration solution use or child immunisation, to exposure to the campaigns. And I think they set standards higher for some of the communication programmes than were set for other kinds of interventions such as service delivery and policy changes. As a result, the field of health communication took that seriously and there has been a long history of refinement in the study designs and indicators to help make that attribution."

<div align="right">Douglas Storey, JHU·CCP</div>

It is also interesting to note that many examples rely on experimental and quasi-experimental evaluative approaches and mixed-methods evaluation is not always the dominant approach.

The persuasiveness of the evidence and the ease of communicating it were the key reasons behind most interviewees' selections. Evidence grading principles (see Box 5), for example the rigour of the research methodology, were less frequently mentioned. The exception was interviewees working in the health communication field; they often explained their selections in terms of their confidence in the methodology, or in the steps taken by the author(s) to account for threats to causal claims.

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[10] Arguably this also varies by health area. For instance, the best examples of evidence were largely focused on child survival and HIV and Aids. One interviewee also noted stronger evidence regarding effective use of communication for family planning and reproductive health, but less for HIV and Aids (and within that, more on prevention and less on treatment and care).

[11] USAID = United States Agency for International Development.

"When I see a radio campaign promoting a particular behaviour like going for VCT[12] on HIV and AIDS, and when there has been some research to show the clinics are overwhelmed by people coming, wanting the testing, at the same time as the campaign is going out, then that is totally persuasive for me. I don't need to know the figures, I don't need the counterfactual, the what if … the first thing I think of when I think about evidence is take-up of services and asking yourself does it work?"

Mary Myers, independent consultant

"We've done community engagement around alcohol, for example, and community mapping with people telling their stories. When we present this data to policy-makers – the economic cost of alcohol plus actual stories of people's lives, it's quite persuasive."

Sue Goldstein, Soul City

Recalling and citing evidence appeared to be easier for those working in evaluation, academia or health communication. Some other interviewees struggled to cite examples spontaneously, while a few even preferred to discuss it with their colleagues outside the interview and send their examples on afterwards. This reflects varying levels of access and use of evidence, and highlights the need to make evidence more accessible specifically to practitioners. Broadly, practitioners tended to cite their own evidence. They also talked about the persuasiveness of individual "stories of change" or anecdotal evidence alongside the research evidence of impact they shared.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to synthesise the evidence within the examples shared by interviewees.[13] However, it is possible to draw out a few broad insights from the health communication evidence cited. Firstly, interviewees' evidence examples suggest that media and communication can achieve positive effects across a variety of outcomes, including knowledge, risk reduction and behaviour. Secondly, effects on behaviour are through both direct (such as media prompting uptake of health services) and indirect (such as getting people talking or increasing self-efficacy which in turn prompts action) pathways. Thirdly, evidence is concentrated in a number of key health topics, such as HIV and Aids and child survival.

> **Box 5: What is evidence grading?**
>
> These are frameworks used to assess the quality of evidence. Evidence grading frameworks employed in international development vary, with variations in inclusion criteria, scope and emphasis on methodology and rigour.
>
> Examples include DFID's *How to Note: Assessing the Strength of Evidence* (2014), the Bond Evidence Principles, adaptations of the Maryland Standard of Scientific Measurement (MSSM) and the Mixed Methods Assessment Tool (MMAT), the Cabinet Office's *Quality in Qualitative Evaluation: A framework for assessing research evidence* (Spencer et al., 2003) and GRADE (www.gradeworkinggroup.org).
>
> Assessing the same body of evidence using existing frameworks would lead to markedly different conclusions depending on framework.

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[12] VCT = voluntary counselling and testing.
[13] The individual systematic reviews referenced in appendix 2 are able to provide this type of evidence synthesis. This is not the purpose of this paper which focuses on perceptions of evidence.

Drawing insights from the governance, resilience and humanitarian response evidence base is much harder. Largely because there were no reviews cited in this study, and the single studies mentioned varied widely in focus. Some governance studies, like the Media Map Project, have drawn conclusions of a correlation between media and development, but have not focused on the impact of individual media for governance programmes. At least two of the governance studies cited by interviewees show a positive relationship between exposure to governance programming and knowledge. It is a limited picture, but this is perhaps not surprising given that measurement and evaluation in governance, as well as resilience and humanitarian response, is relatively new.

Evidence gaps

Across interviewees, and in the systematic reviews cited in this paper, there was a call for greater use and investment in evaluation within the media for development sector. This was widely seen to be critical, if the sector's evidence base is to be strengthened and evidence gaps plugged.

> "There are challenges and gaps specific to media and communication evidence [and child survival], including that we don't know enough about effect size, duration, behaviour maintenance, sustainability, cost, cost–benefit, or have an answer to the perennial point that every context is different."
>
> Elizabeth Fox, USAID

> "If I'm the BBG14 and I'm projecting Radio Farda into Iran - how can I tell whether it's worth putting $10 into that as opposed to some other technique? What's the comparative relationship between various approaches to an objective? And it's hard enough to define the objective."
>
> Monroe Price, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania

> "I think the long-term impacts – we haven't answered the question of 'what is the contribution of our radio programme to people at large, or to governance improvements' – we have a lot of evidence of our little programme or radio show, but the contribution is still hard for us to really show, either linear or non-linear to improving larger systems."
>
> Lena Slachmuijlder, SFCG

> "It is vital for our credibility to show value for money and to show that media works."
>
> Caroline Howie, BBC Media Action

Specific gaps highlighted by interviewees are captured in Box 6. They are supplemented by the priority research questions in Appendix 3. For example, one gap noted was the lack of evidence on behaviour maintenance; Elizabeth Fox from USAID proposed a priority research question as "How can we better evidence behaviour maintenance and support evaluations beyond programme timelines?"

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14 BBG = Broadcasting Board of Governors (United States).

Box 6: Gaps in the existing evidence

- What media and communication is *not* best placed to do
- Maintenance of change, for example behaviour maintenance, knowledge retention, awareness levels
- Sustainability
- Causal pathways, for example how media and communication can influence behaviours indirectly through other determinants such as knowledge or self-efficacy
- Efficacy of different media and communication platforms, for example drama compared with factual
- Comparison studies, for example looking at media campaigns compared with media campaigns incorporating other complementary activities such as peer-to-peer community outreach
- Effect sizes
- Cost-effectiveness; new areas such as mHealth, open government, open data
- Newer themes, such as governance, humanitarian response, resilience
- Media for development failures and lessons learnt

3. Building an evidence base – points for consideration

Appreciating the evidence examples cited in Section 2, this section of the paper focuses on the importance of building on that evidence by evaluating both the direct and indirect outcomes from media and communication interventions alongside documenting implementation learning. It concludes with a useful case study from an evidence summit about how to build an evidence-informed research agenda.

Direct and indirect outcomes

The interviews reveal that much of the existing research and evaluation has attempted to evaluate direct outcomes from media for development interventions. For example, understanding the relationship between exposure to a political radio debate programme and political knowledge, or evaluating whether a health communication campaign produces effects through direct persuasion based on changing beliefs about perception of benefits.

But direct paths are not the only route. Media for development interventions are often built on ideas around diffusion of information or social interpretations of ideas. These less direct paths of effect have important implications for designs of evaluations. Causal pathways that require networks to discuss and share ideas in order to influence, for example social norms, need an evaluation approach that does not just compare those exposed with those not exposed, because people may be indirectly exposed via their social networks. Understanding how media and communication are intended to work will affect how we can sensibly evaluate them. The use of pathway analysis or social network analysis as methodologies to understand these causal chains hold promise for evaluation in the field. However, to date, they have been used sparingly by a small number of practitioners, including Soul City (Kincaid et al., 2008), JHU·CCP, and BBC Media Action (Frank et al., 2012). Greater collaboration between academia and practitioners in this area and around complexity theory could support innovative evidence creation in the future.

Two under-prioritised areas of evidence

1. People and media

Little of the evidence cited by interviewees explored how people and media interact – for example, the impact of media on identity, priorities, perceptions of self or others, or how people use media in their daily decision-making – and how this varies by local context. There is a large and established body of academic literature on this area yet, despite its utility for the media for development sector, it was not an evidence area that interviewees mentioned.

> "I think if we look at the developed world and studies around the way in which television programmes change the ways people think about gays and lesbians or racial groups, or 16-year-old pregnant mothers – there is compelling evidence that shows that what people watch affects the way they think about themselves and the way they feel and, if anything, let's continue to build on that."
>
> Lena Slachmuijlder, SFCG

There appears to be great potential for the media for development sector to contribute to evidence in this area going forward.[15] In particular, for many practitioners this type of research is part of their existing formative work to understand the audience, pre-test content and monitor how it is being received. However, very little of this research is formally documented and systematically shared within the media for development sector.[16]

> "Formative research is very important – creative, ethnographic techniques to really understand how they see themselves and how they'd like to be addressed."
>
> Saul Johnson, Health and Development Africa (speaking about a health communication intervention with sex workers in taverns in South Africa)

Collating and sharing this data would contribute to sectorial learning and collaboration, as it is often *within* this formative data that a lot of the information about local context and the social aspects of an intervention is found. Drawing on behavioural economics, there is also potential to combine this formative and process research with trials to test how content is being received and whether communication objectives are being met. While this work would only focus on the short-term effects of media and communication it would prompt learning on how media and communication work and why.

2. Experiential and implementation learning

From the interviews, it is clear that a great deal of experiential and implementation learning is sitting untapped within practitioner organisations. Practitioners interviewed know that the questions driving change at project level are often different to those required by the donor, and that there is often no

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[15] This is not to say that outside of these interviews existing work is not happening in the area. For example, the authors are aware of collaborations between media scholars and media for development practitioners in areas such as narrative engagement, character engagement and media framing.

[16] Notwithstanding work on entertainment education, by organisations like The Norman Lear Center and their Media Impact Project (http://www.learcenter.org/html/about/?cm=about) or the International Entertainment Education Conferences organised by JHU-CCP.

formal mechanism for capturing and sharing answers around learning. Ongoing iterative "experiential" learning often gets lost – particularly in larger, cross-regional organisations – after the end of a project or after a staff member leaves. Tensions around managing evidence for accountability and evidence for learning are also noted:

> "The daily reality is that tensions between the two (accountability and learning) are alive and kicking. This results in major headaches for many organizations and individuals, straining relationships up and down the 'aid chain'. Official policies that profess the importance of learning are often contradicted by bureaucratic protocols and accounting systems which demand proof of results against pre-set targets. In the process, data are distorted (or obtained with much pain) and learning is aborted (or is too haphazard to make a difference)."
>
> Guijt, 2010, p. 277

Whether to capture, share and dignify experiential learning alongside impact learning is a key question. Further questions are how that process could actually be implemented, and how the information would be validated compared with evidence of impact data. Will trying to record and capture experiential learning weaken its learning-power, or would it be useful to have practitioners summarise their learning to accompany formal evaluation reports or journal articles? Learning from the approach of others in the sector would be a first step. For example, 3ie is currently using implementation analysis in their evidence synthesis work to understand the experiences of project implementation compared with theories of change. This approach aims to ensure that implementation questions (for example, what are the experiences of implementing an intervention since its inception?) are evidenced alongside effectiveness questions (such as, what are the effects of an intervention on final outcomes?, what are the effects on outcomes in control or comparison areas?), in order to inform learning on what works and why.[17]

Similarly, the use of implementation science is growing in the field of global health research.[18] It is used to investigate and address major bottlenecks (for example, social, behavioural, economic, management) that impede effective implementation, to test new approaches to improve health programming, and to determine the causal relationship between the intervention and its impact.

In prioritising evidence creation in these two areas, lessons can also be drawn from pioneering sectorial efforts to build evidence. Box 7 describes a recent example of an Evidence Summit on Enhancing Child Survival, which aimed to identify – using existing evidence – what works in supporting health-related behaviour change, and provides a useful case study of how to build an evidence-informed research agenda.

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[17] See Appendix 5: Mixed methods evaluation evidence – farmer field schools for further information.

[18] See Elizabeth S. Higgs, Evidence to Action: Evidence Summit on Enhancing Child Survival and Development through Population Level Behavior Change, paper given at the Debates in Change Symposium organised by the Wellcome Trust and BBC Media Action, June 2014.

Box 7: How did behaviour come to matter in the evidence debates: A matter of prioritisation and timelines

We know that improving child survival requires promotion of healthy behaviours as well as efforts to address social exclusion, discrimination and a range of social and behavioural determinants that cut across the life cycle. These determinants are complex. They include structural barriers, financial barriers, individual and collective motivations, social and community norms, policy environments, and cultural systems that can enable or impede individuals and communities to adopt, change, or maintain healthy behaviour.

On 3–4 June 2013 in Washington, DC, USAID, in collaboration with the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef), hosted an Evidence Summit on Enhancing Child Survival and Development in Lower- and Middle-Income Countries by Achieving Population-Level Behaviour Change. The overarching goal of the summit was to determine which evidence-based interventions and strategies support a sustainable shift in health-related behaviours to reduce under-five morbidity and mortality in lower- and middle-income countries. The 200 or so summit participants and, eventually, 69 authors produced an exciting collection of evidence, demonstrating both the remarkable successes and effective interventions, and a series of real gaps in knowledge and data.

Because development challenges are complex, intrinsically multidisciplinary and therefore informed by diverse data inputs and expertise, evidence summits engage a broad coalition of expert contributors from across governments, academia, development agencies, and organizations from lower- and middle-income countries. The expected outcomes from summits include: clarity on evidence to inform policies, programmes and practice, and the identification of knowledge gaps to inform a research agenda.

Summary

- Understanding how media and communication are intended to work will affect how we can sensibly evaluate them.
- Effects may be direct (for example, increasing referrals to a clinic) or indirect (for example, media for development interventions are often built on ideas around diffusion of information or influencing social norms).
- Understanding the social and contextual nature of change is critical to evaluation.
- More work to understand and test these causal pathways is needed.
- Greater collaboration between academia and practitioners around casual pathways, social networks and complexity could improve evaluation design approaches.
- There is potential to combine practitioners' formative and process research, such as pre-testing, with academic and donor interest in using trials to test how media and communication works and why.
- There are vast amounts of experiential and implementation learning sitting within practitioner organisations which could be integrated into the sector's evidence base.

4. The challenges of building an evidence base

Before sharing a proposed way forward through the evidence agenda, it is important to outline the challenges around evidence generation in the media for development sector. These challenges are grouped into capacity and structural challenges, as well as methodological challenges. Appendix 6 provides details on the methodological challenges more broadly.

1. Capacity and structural challenges

Capacity and structural challenges identified were around budgets, skills and resourcing, as well as questions of independence in a sector where many organisations research and evaluate their own programmes.

Budgets – Ensuring high-quality monitoring, evaluation and learning in general costs money. It relies on capacity and resources often not available in small organisations dependent on grant funding, of which only a small proportion goes to research and/or monitoring and evaluation. Evaluators and practitioners also stressed that research is an important element of programme design and delivery, for example formative research, monitoring and pre-testing. This leaves very little budget, if any, for rigorous summative evaluation, cost–benefit and cost-effectiveness analysis, causal pathway analysis or implementation reviews.

> "We haven't done it [cost-effectiveness analysis] again because we didn't have the data because it is quite an expensive process to do the full costing and do the full analysis. So we haven't really done it again and to be honest most people don't seem to be interested in cost per change. They're more interested in how many people we reached."
>
> Sue Goldstein, Soul City

Resourcing, quality, capacity and skills for the sector - A key challenge identified by practitioner organisations was around resourcing and skills in the sector, particularly within smaller non-governmental organisations (NGOs), who tend to commission out their research, monitoring and evaluation. Efforts to make the case for research and evaluation were still being made in some of the practitioner organisations we spoke with. Others talked about capacity and skills gaps within the sector as barriers to conducting high-quality research. Interviewees were clear that the skills required to carry out robust and rigorous evaluations do not exist in equal measure across the globe. Furthermore, while locally gathered data can be checked and managed in the local context, any attempt at gathering aggregatable data, which would make comparisons between countries possible, needs to be part of a central mechanism that manages and systematises the research. There is also a cost associated with this and the willingness of donors to pay for this also varies significantly. However, drawbacks around this type of centralisation were also noted:

> "For a long time PSI did have a standardised approach – there were many problems with it … standardised approach to analysis, to how data was collected. Really like a one-size fits all and of course a one-size doesn't really fit any – the reasons for that were well intentioned, having something you could roll out quite easily to countries with huge variations in their capacity … if you do nothing else, if you do this you will have some evidence … it was a real factory like approach … in the last few years we have diversified our evaluation approaches,

we rely less on standard approaches, partly through working with academia, and through partnerships."

<div align="right">Gary Mundy, PSI</div>

Specific sectors also had their own challenges:

"Humanitarian work – where we're trying to go and struggling, because of the nature of the work itself, response comes out of nowhere and absorbs all of people's energy. Evidence falls by the wayside, unless you have a good system in place."

<div align="right">Tara Susman-Peña, Internews</div>

Key questions include how can smaller NGOs start to feed into the more formal evidence base, given barriers to academic publishing including long timeframes?

"Organisations like the World Bank have money and capacity to design and conduct high-quality, long-term evaluation; other organisations do not, and this is an issue for creating evidence."

<div align="right">Mark Nelson, CIMA</div>

Evidence for multiple masters, proportionality and realistic expectations – Many interviewees cited increased demands on research and evidence in relation to balancing formative and summative evaluation and also being able to deliver against the "what do I get for my money" type questions. In some cases interviewees questioned this burgeoning need to evaluate everything.

"Is there a question about whether we need to evaluate everything? Evaluation feasibility studies are growing…"

<div align="right">Rick Davis, independent consultant</div>

"Balancing competing demands (is hard) – I know what the constraints are in the field as well. It's all very well back in London saying 'I want evidence and a rigorous scientific study', but getting enumerators out into the field in Tanzania or Sierra Leone is … the realities are very complicated, time consuming and expensive as well."

<div align="right">Nicola Harford, iMedia Associates</div>

There was a notable level of cynicism regarding the notion of evidence-based policy-making, with a number of interviewees characterising politicians' decision-making as being more about expediency. One interviewee highlighted the work of Professor Thomas Schwandt and the notion of "evidence-influenced policy", which articulates the fact that the producers of evidence need to better understand how (scientific) evidence is used in a policy argument; that is a mixture of facts, values and political considerations (Prewitt, et al., 2012).

Relatedly, interviews suggest that building the evidence base for media for development to satisfy even a single master isn't a single exercise – it takes time and multiple studies over time. Project-level monitoring and evaluation can only provide part of the picture alongside academic research, donor commitment and an enduring, strategic approach to evidence building across the sector. Meeting different masters' (donors, policy-makers and practitioners) evidence needs requires investment in research and evaluation for learning, as well as an understanding that evaluation techniques to demonstrate evidence and cost-effectiveness do, in themselves, cost. As articulated in the purpose for this paper, there is a need for a joined-up approach on what we as a sector do and

don't know and about how to plug evidence gaps. This involves strategic oversight, and buy-in across different masters on what the overarching questions for the sector need to be, in relation to wider development outcomes.

> "Policy-makers and donors want to find out where media fits into their strategies for post-conflict, peacebuilding, nation building – we're at the cross-roads between human rights, education, governance, citizen empowerment – we need to articulate the role of media and what evidence there is for these different sectors which may be different for each area – and require different kinds of evidence."
>
> Anne Bennett, Hirondelle USA

A further important master, or audience, for any evaluation is the audience itself:

> "We need to know professionally are we on the right track, and we need to know on behalf of the audience that there is a value for them of what we are doing."
>
> Caroline Howie, BBC Media Action

Independence – A number of practitioner organisations in the sector evaluate their own programmes. Interviewees reflected on this and identified the questions this poses, and the challenges to independence, as well as the opportunities for shared learning. For some, the evidence generated by academics is seen as the most independent and credible.

> "I think there is a fundamental problem with … any of the evidence that is generated by the actual implementers themselves – as soon as the 'evidence' has a practitioner's name on it there is going to be an immediate loss of credibility."
>
> Mary Myers, independent consultant

Others pointed out the value of research and evaluation being integrated into programme delivery, and the value of researchers being embedded in project design and implementation.[19] External consultants appointed to conduct summative evaluations at the end of a project or programme were critiqued for lacking an in-depth understanding of local contexts or interventions.

2. Methodological challenges

As identified in this research, the methodological challenges facing researchers and evaluators of media for development, particular to this sector, include the following.

Complex and complementary paths of effect – Media and communication interventions can impact individuals and groups directly, indirectly (for example through social networks or diffusion of ideas) and through other pathways (for example by influencing governments and systemic change). This demands more complex and ultimately costly evaluative approaches and choices about priority research questions.

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[19] This is a model which BBC Media Action uses, and under one of its larger grants research and data is assessed annually by external assessors. In addition, BBC Media Action has established organisational standards for quality in evidence – known as "Assuring Integrity in Measurement" (AIM) based on the Bond Evidence Principles –to ensure the integrity of the research produced internally.

Contribution/attribution and use of control groups – Isolating the impact of mass media interventions can be challenging. Many interviewees recognised that randomisation is the most robust method to establish attribution; however, there was widespread agreement that there are major limitations to the feasibility and practicality of implementing randomised controlled trials (RCTs) in media and communication interventions. These views align with the findings from research, that there is the need for alternative study designs to randomised trials as the optimal means for evaluating full coverage mass media campaigns (Bertrand et al., 2006; Hornik, 2002).[20]

> "You don't necessarily aspire to the ideal randomised controlled trial because, in many cases, it is simply not feasible. For example, in mass media it is particularly difficult because often times you are using national, or at least regional, broadcasting systems and the whole goal of the campaign is to reach as many people as you possibly can. So restricting the campaign in any way so as to have a control group is really counterproductive."
>
> Danielle Naugle, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania

> "I find RCTs a huge problem. I tell you why I find them a problem. That what happens is that people, communities are randomised. Now if anyone has ever done any work in any community you will have an understanding that having one dynamic leader in a community makes all the difference or having a clinic in the community compared to none. You know there are so many community variables that comparing one community to another community doesn't actually make sense."
>
> Sue Goldstein, Soul City

In the small number of cases where RCTs have been applied to the sector, they were described as "rare" or "fortuitous" or "expensive". Examples include the current Development Media International (DMI) health communication evaluation in Burkina Faso, where the highly fragmented community media market and the absence of a national broadcaster afford randomisation. Other RCTs applied in the sector were critiqued for breaking down complex interventions into measureable parts rather than assessing the whole. For example, randomising listening groups and playing content rather than assessing the mass media campaign in situ or randomising media exposure for short periods in controlled conditions, for example a 60-minute bus journey. While these approaches may create experimental conditions to strengthen causal claims, they were critiqued for not following a project's overall theory of change.

Other critiques include: RCTs are often better at individual effects assessment than assessing the impact occurring through social paths of effect; it is harder to assign social networks to treatment and control groups; and RCTs are better at detecting quick, large effects than slow and small

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[20] "The randomised controlled trial, is the gold standard, the ideal design, only if the goal is to maximise one of the three priorities – internal validity or strongly defensible claims of effects. If you want to make sure your evaluation also allows claims of external validity, RCTs may not be the gold standard. If RCTs have limited promise, there is growing experience with other evaluation approaches such as pre–post studies, long-term cohort studies, interrupted time series and quasi-experiments" (Professor Robert Hornik speaking at the Debates in Change Symposium organised by the Wellcome Trust and BBC Media Action, June 2014).

changes. As a result, interviewees preferred alternative approaches to evaluation. In some cases, quasi-experimental methods were seen as an alternative approach, but they were noted as "data hungry", technically resource intensive and often beyond the existing evaluation capacity of many practitioner organisations.

Confounders – Media is only one influencer on individuals, communities and networks. The complexity of media landscapes, and the proliferation of actors and outlets and the impact of this complexity, or messiness, on claims of attribution (i.e. being able to claim that it was solely media programming which produced this change) were noted by many interviewees, particularly those working in evaluation.

> "As long as you have made every attempt to control for confounding variables and bias in sampling and responses, and are transparent about this, then that is enough."

> Saul Johnson, Health and Development Africa

> "Of course we all know the challenges of isolating the effect of an individual campaign in a noisy environment."
>
> Mary Myers, independent consultant

Effect size – This includes the challenge of demonstrating effects when there is insufficient previous data to calculate samples, or insufficient budget to sample enough people to assess effects. In addition, some changes that media and communication can make (for example, shifting social norms) are slow and may be small. Yet slow and small can matter in the long run on a population basis.

> "On some levels, operators of projects (practitioners) can sometimes be naive about how easy it is to show effects. Indeed they are often quite optimistic that they are being effective in producing outcomes and a hard-nose research project might not support them. So there's a level of naivety at the project level about the likelihood of a serious design showing effects. At the level of donors, sometimes they are really interested in supporting the ongoing operations of the project, but they have other needs and so they want some resources to go towards a definitive statement of the effectiveness of the project towards a policy outcome."

> Robert Hornik, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania

Summary

- Key challenges in media for development evaluation are structural (for example, sufficient budgets and research capacity) and methodological (for example, challenges of attribution).
- There are competing requirements on summative evaluations:*
    - Evaluation designs which permit credible claims of effects
    - Evaluations which respect complex paths to success
    - Evaluations which meet limits of funding, time and professional skill.

*Drawn from a presentation by Professor Robert Hornik speaking at the Debates in Change Symposium organised by the Wellcome Trust and BBC Media Action, June 2014.

5. An evidence agenda – next steps in taking this conversation forward

> "What constitutes evidence is often not clear-cut. Different forms of 'evidence' from practitioners, beneficiaries, partners and policy-makers themselves, vie with each other in real-world settings."

> Stern, 2012, p. 9

This section proposes a way forward by presenting a proposal for an evidence agenda and the structures around it.

What is needed?

The research reveals that the lack of clear standards for reporting evidence from media for development programmes, the lack of consistent investment in summative evaluation, the limited efforts to date to collate and systematically review the evidence that does exist, and the paucity of relevant fora in which to critique and understand research and evaluation findings, are significant barriers to evidence generation. To move evidence conversations forward, all four are required. This section will explore each need identified in the research in more detail.

1. There is a need for clearer standards for evaluation reporting

Practitioners expressed frustrations around the lack of a clear articulation of what evidence counts for the sector and for different masters. Incentives and investment tend to be greater for the creation and reporting of *evidence for accountability* to meet donor reporting requirements and retain funding, compared with the incentives for creating and reporting *evidence of learning*. This is particularly the case in smaller organisations that need to prioritise resources on results-based monitoring and reporting. All interviewees acknowledged that there are necessary built-in incentives and investment for gathering evidence for accountability as it is vital to the sector. However, the research suggests that what constitutes evidence for accountability was highly dependent on the reporting and evaluation requirements of the individual donor.

> "Donors like to see numbers … but often, especially non-research people, are strongly swayed by stories and qualitative evidence, which could be a once off. … [Policy-makers] are interested in the economy of an intervention – how much is it going to cost and is it cheaper to improve than to keep the status quo?"

> Sue Goldstein, Soul City

> "Most donors tend to ask questions related to accountability and outputs – did you create 140 episodes? Where did they air and when? Some donors are starting to ask questions about outcomes, impacts, reach and resonance. To answer those questions we need more quantitative and qualitative data and analysis … [but] overall it is upward driven."

> Vanessa Corlazzoli, SFCG

In some cases, donors require only process level and results data, for example number of episodes produced or percentage of the audience reached. Some practitioners welcomed this clarity and simplicity; others viewed it as restrictive and results focused. Some practitioners saw this as more

about achieving targets and results to report to top-level logframes [21] or grant management indicators. In other cases and particularly in health communication, donors demanded more rigorous summative evaluations to understand the impact of the media for development interventions on outcomes or the drivers of these outcomes. There was a clear demand for the sector to inform and articulate evidence standards:

> "The sector needs to come together and create a clear criteria and standards in order to effectively evaluate media products and programmes. This criterion would be useful in comparing radio and TV programmes within and across organisations. It will help the sector grow its body of evidence. For instance, we need to better understand what is an acceptable listenership rate to produce attitudinal and behaviour changes in conflict and fragile environments … How many times does the audience need to hear a message in order for there to be change … If as a sector we can come together and clearly show 'this is what good programming looks like and these are some standards, and tests them out' then we would be much further along."
>
> Vanessa Corlazzoli, SFCG

Developing sectorial evidential standards need not start from scratch. It can build on existing evidence guidance, such as the Bond Evidence Principles, criteria used in existing systematic reviews in the sector (such as Naugle and Hornik, 2014; Noar et al., 2009 and Bertrand et al., 2006), and make use of best practice in practitioner organisations. For example, researchers at JHU·CCP try to satisfy as many of the eight Piotrow et al., (1997) criteria[22] as possible when assessing the story of programme impact. See Figure 3 for more information on the Naugle and Hornik, and Piotrow sets of criteria, which could be used to inform the development of sectorial evidence report standards.

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[21] A logframe, or logical framework, is an approach mainly used to design monitoring and evaluation of projects.
[22] Recognising that evaluating any social programme is difficult, to make the most convincing case that the programme was responsible for the observed outcome, Piotrow outlines eight criteria. It is difficult to satisfy all eight criteria in a single study. Fortunately, they are not all required in order to make a valid conclusion about impact. The more that apply, however, the greater the confidence in the conclusion.

Figure 3: Two examples of evaluation criteria used in health communication evaluations

Evaluation criteria: Naugle and Hornik (2014)	Evaluation criteria: Piotrow et al. (1997)
Threats to inferences are assessed based on: 1. **Sampling method:** eg biased or unrepresentative of population of interest. 2. **Timing of data collection:** eg across time before and after intervention, across individuals (eg different levels of exposure post-intervention and controlling for confounders) and across outcomes (eg between treatment and control sites). 3. **Dose response**: greater levels of exposure are associated with incrementally greater values on the outcome behaviour. They also consider whether the evaluation **traces a pathway** from exposure through the theoretically based mediators targeted by the mass media campaign (eg attitudes, self-efficacy, social norms, intentions, etc.) to the outcome behaviour or **assessed threats of history** (eg assessed if changes that occur simultaneously with the intervention may be responsible for the observed effects). Stronger evaluations are those that have an unbiased sample and make a substantial effort to address threats to inference through a combination of multiple comparison groups, statistical controls and, in some cases, advanced statistical methods like propensity score matching, bivariate probit models, or fixed effects analysis.	1. **Change:** Did a change occur? 2. **Correlation:** Is there is a correlation between change and the intervention? 3. **Time order:** Did change occur *after* the intervention? 4. **Confounding:** Have confounding factors been accounted for? 5. **Magnitude:** Are there any large or abrupt changes in the trend? 6. **Dose response:** Is there evidence of a dose response relationship (eg as exposure increases, effects increase)? 7. **Theoretical coherence:** Is there evidence that the theory of change (the hypothesised causal pathways) are supported by impact data? 8. **Replication with variation:** Are results consistent with those found in similar studies (eg average effects sizes reported in meta-analyses)?

Any evaluation framework also needs to go beyond quantitative evidence and provide guidance on how to capture and report qualitative evaluative data. Many interviewees noted that a lot of qualitative research in the sector is of poor quality, and investment and understanding about how and when to apply qualitative impact evaluation methodologies to media and communication interventions is needed.

Inadequate evaluation frameworks are not exclusive to the media for development sector. In 2013, a study supported by USAID and the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality compared six evidence frameworks for evaluating evidence for global health interventions. It showed that assessing the same body of evidence yielded different conclusions regarding strength of evidence depending on

which framework was used.[23] The study concluded that more work is needed either to adapt one or more of the existing frameworks, or to develop an entirely new framework to meet the needs of policy-makers and others responsible for implementing global health interventions (Luoto et al., 2013).

In summary, greater consensus and agreement is clearly required on how evaluation data needs to be reported. This reporting needs to include more information on intervention design and exposure, as well as evaluation design and methods, which are required to conduct a meta-analysis and better understand what features of the interventions are most associated with success. Although developing any evaluation framework will not be an easy task, if prioritised as part of our proposed evidence agenda on media for development, it has the potential to improve global decision-making around the use of media and communication in development. Evaluation reporting guidelines would not only provide greater clarity on evidential standards required from those responsible for conducting and reporting on evaluations, but they would also support the sector to be synthesising evaluative evidence more systematically. This is explored further in the next section.

2. Greater investment in rigorous formative and summative evaluations and implementation research

It is clear that this variability in the expectations for evaluative reporting standards is having – and will continue to have – profound implications for the generation of sectorial evidence. Similarly if projects are not funded to produce rigorous summative evaluations, the body of evidence we can expect to build over the coming years will be markedly diminished. This summative research needs to be complemented by formative research and learning from implementation science of the types described in Section 2.

Additionally, investment in aggregation of the data collection effort for evidence generation is needed.

3. Greater efforts to collate, comprehensively review and share the evidence that does exist

Donors interviewed tended to want practitioners to publish their research and evaluations in peer review journal articles to contribute to the formal evidence base. However, it was not clear what incentives, processes and funding were in place to support elevating project monitoring and evaluation into sectorial evidence. While some practitioners acknowledged the value of publishing in the formal evidence base, they also recognised that this required a very different standard of evidence to that of a practitioner's blog or a grant management report.

Those working on producing and funding systematic reviews called for more evaluations to be made available and for greater improvements in technical reporting, explanations of methodological limitation and threats to inference. As noted earlier, standards on how to report evaluation data and designs need to be universally agreed and more explicit, otherwise evaluations in the sector will be

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[23] Some of these difference were extreme (with the same evidence base assessed as "strong" in one framework and "low quality" in another framework). The study found that existing frameworks for the assessment of public health evidence do not deliver key pieces of information to inform best practices for community and large-scale global health programmes. They identified the need for an evidence framework, appropriate for application to a global health setting in a low- and middle-income country context, which focuses on issues such as implementation and sustainability not currently included in existing evidence assessment frameworks.

excluded from future systematic reviews. Of the 111 evaluations assessed in the review of the effectiveness of mass media for child survival, only 41% (46 studies) were classified as "stronger" (33 were classified as weak, 32 as moderate). The review noted that the vast majority of the weak evaluations made no attempt to address threats to inference and just under a third did not report the sampling methodology (Naugle and Hornik, 2014).

> "It would be very useful to come up with a worksheet or flow chart of threats to inference to think through as you design and evaluate a campaign ... but also a checklist of details that should be included in the write-up of the evaluation of a mass media campaign. It is very difficult to meta-analyse the evaluations as they stand because the campaigns are so diverse and they don't systematically report all the information that we would need to be able to make statements about which particular components of a campaign design are associated with positive results."
>
> Danielle Naugle, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania

4. Appropriate fora to critique and understand research and evaluation findings

This research suggests that, at least as far as many academics and practitioners are concerned, the problem in the media for development field is not simply, or even principally, a lack of evidence but an appropriate space in which to present, critique and understand that evidence.

> "There is actually a ton of evidence that media matters for development, it just hasn't been put into practice. There hasn't been a bridge between the evidence and the policy."
>
> Tara Susman-Peña, Internews (speaking about findings from Media Map Project)

> "[The Kincaid study on Soul City[24]] showed that 700,000 lives were saved through this, I don't really understand why it hasn't been taken more seriously."
>
> Sue Goldstein, Soul City

This matters. We have discussed earlier in the paper the effects of privileging particular types of data and methodological approaches, and what the media for development sector loses as a result of this perspective. If policy-makers are not properly appraising, and potentially prioritising, cost-effective efforts that save lives at scale, then resources risk being squandered on less cost-effective approaches. If the evidence that Soul City and its partners prevented 700,000 HIV infections is accepted, such studies have huge implications and potentially offer major opportunities for effective, evidence-based policy to slow HIV infection rates. If the evidence is ignored or poorly appraised then those opportunities will be missed.

Much remains to be done to improve evidence in this field, but a key next step is to subject the evidence that does exist to rigorous, critical scrutiny, thereby allowing it to be taken more seriously by policy-makers, in decisions where robust evidence would make a difference.[25] This scrutiny would involve focusing on the research questions being answered by the evidence. It requires establishing legitimate fora for considering a range of evidence, whether "informal" process and implementation-related evidence, evidence from mixed-method or ethnographic evaluations, an RCT or a systematic

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[24] Kincaid et al., (2014) and Kincaid et al., (2008).
[25] It is well acknowledged that not all policy decision-making is evidence-based.

review. This would enable the criteria of "strength" to be driven less by methodology and more by a rigorous definition of the research questions alongside their *appropriate* methodologies.

Our interviews found that practitioner organisations acknowledge that they need to get better at publishing their evidence in accessible ways. Those investing in the sector have a responsibility to support and reward evaluation sharing. And the sector itself could benefit from being braver about sharing its evidence, "good" or "bad":

> "All of Search for Common Ground's evaluations are online regardless of the evaluation quality, and whether the findings were positive or negative. We strongly believe it is important to share evidence and lessons learnt."
>
> Vanessa Corlazzoli, SFCG

Improving evidence reporting standards and sector-wide analysis within the formal evidence base is only part of the answer. Fora are needed, where it is possible to invest time in critiquing and understanding research and evaluation findings. This research reveals that, among the people we interviewed, practitioners are least likely to consult the formal evidence base. This underscores previous BBC Media Action research which showed that practitioners and donors were less likely than academics to use the formal evidence base because many felt that it did not speak to them, and did not help them to improve their work on the ground (Annenberg Center for Global Communication Studies, University of Pennsylvania (CGCS), 2012).

Fora are required, which allow practitioners, evaluators and donors to convene to discuss and debate evaluation findings (across themes and issues). This may help to address some of the frustration felt about the perception that strong evaluation findings do not seem to be informing policy and funding decisions:

> "For the fourth series (of Soul City) we did an analysis of change, we looked at increased knowledge, shift in social norms and behaviour as aspects of social change – looked at cost of shifting/improving these aspects and worked out a unit cost. We thought it was fabulous, but it didn't seem to influence the funders particularly."
>
> Sue Goldstein, Soul City

Such fora could also address calls to make evaluations and evidence reviews more accessible and digestible to non-technical audiences:

> "One of the challenges for research … is to bring people along, keep the language less obscure. What does 'efficacy' mean – it means that a 19-year-old woman feels that she can stand up and ask a question."
>
> David Prosser, BBC Media Action

These fora could promote a culture of learning and encourage the sharing of failure. The lack of incentives and investment in evidence collection and reporting around learning means that there is a disincentive to collect learning evidence of failure. There are also other disincentives for collecting and sharing evidence for learning, such as the limits of intellectual property preventing publishing of findings and organisations not wanting to report failure or wanting to protect findings for their own next big grant application. This all prevents the sharing of evidence for learning. Since learning from mistakes is an important factor in contributing to future successes, this reduced incentive to report

shortcomings is a missed opportunity for improvement, from the perspective of an evidence for learning framework.

> "What I find frustrating – with the way the funding environment works, we can't afford to say our programme didn't work. But we should be able to do that and to experiment to see what works and what doesn't. There should be a funding stream that allows that kind of experimentation."
>
> Sue Goldstein, Soul City

> "[The] trap of donor funding – you have to fulfil what you said you were going to fulfil … Does the need for evidence stifle growth and innovation?"
>
> Tara Susman-Peña, Internews

> "On the value in learning from what doesn't work – funders could be more supportive … Bond are trying to develop a good donor index, to encourage donors to be open to change and understanding what you've learnt, rewarding honesty."
>
> Sarah Mistry, Bond

> "Of course a $3m budget will allow for gold standard evaluation investment, and in turn skews resources to the organisations which do not work at this scale."
>
> Irene Guijt, independent consultant

> "We shouldn't be afraid of asking the hard questions – and at times they might be questions about programme quality or implementation and at other times, they might be questions about how our programmes are impacting or effective, or efficient."
>
> Lena Slachmuijlder, SFCG

The evidence agenda

Informed by our interviews we describe below a proposal for an evidence agenda for the media for development sector.

a)   Characteristics

The purpose of this agenda is to enable the media for development sector to have an evidence-based conversation within the next 10 years. It is to propose a way forward that is called for by practitioners, donors and colleagues around the globe and to collectively move forward the conversation about the impact of media for development.

We propose that the conversation needs to be coherent and **not fragmented** by national, regional, donor or outcome-driven boundaries. It is a call to have cross-thematic learning from projects which are in media for development.

We propose that any evidence agenda needs to be **built on the strong foundations** of a theory of change or a set of assumptions on how the media works and where it can have impact rather than on any methodological fads or fashions.

We propose that the evidence agenda must create evidence which is appropriate in nature to the **social change** the media is creating. Understanding the social and societal changes that media can create must lie at the heart of any hierarchy of evidence.

We propose that evidence gathered must look at the issue of **long-term development change and sustainability**. It needs to look beyond the short-term single case study models determined by the donor cycles.

b)   Principles

This is a collective attempt to develop a practitioner-led media-centric approach, working with donors, academics and evaluators.

The evidence agenda must:

- Place the **context** of the change at its heart
- Include a view of how the interventions **change over time**
- Look at the **changing context and media environment over time**
- Be situated in an **understanding of the social situation** and therefore incorporate multiple lenses/methodologies through which we can understand the change
- Be **led by research questions**
- Be based on clear **evidential reporting standards**
- Involve **fora** to discuss and share existing evidence
- Seek to **systematically collate and share examples**
- Highlight where evidence gaps need to be filled through **strategic, longer-term and collaborative investment** in evaluation

c)   Cautionary note

The evidence agenda should be driven by practitioner assumptions of the role of media and communication in development or by a theory of change. It should be cautious about prioritising any methodological fashion and look to draw on as many rigorous analyses as is appropriate and value for money. The sector has been subject to both the participatory and the biomedical framework over the last two decades. While both can be helpful in understanding particular aspects of the kinds of change that media for development aims to make, neither is sufficient on its own to fully explain such change.

d)   The nature of the convening space (fora)

The purpose of the convening space is to demystify evidence and allow a greater level of practice engagement in the creation of evidence. It will also allow us to create a larger collective voice around the impact of media for development, maximising the use of available data and available research resource. This will develop the understanding of what works and what does not work from practice and data gathered in the field. The evidence gathered needs to be useful for both policy and practice. It can also provide a mechanism for sharing research tools, instruments and scales.

We are mindful of the resourcing challenges that all of us in the sector face around research and data gathering. We have listed some of these in the paper. We need to convene a collective space to share existing evidence, from practice. We currently each hold data and unpublished evaluations, paid for by public money which, if collated, could take us a step forward in contributing to evidence for the sector.

> We would also need a convening and dissemination mechanism to analyse, understand and share what we as a sector are learning. The characteristics of the convening space are:
>
> - Urgency – As a sector we need to prioritise this and move forward on this evidence agenda with expediency as the risk of not doing so, as discussed earlier in the paper, is high.
> - Inclusion of different types of actors – This must include multi-national, national, local and community-level partners.
> - Inclusion of different types of methodologies.
> - Inclusion of different types of data – Depending on the size and scale of research resources, media practitioners could contribute to a few, some or all of the types of measures shown below.
> - Dissemination – This needs to be done in bite-size chunks, crystallising, demystifying, simplifying.
> - Learning – There needs to be a clearly incentivised mechanism for sharing what works and what does not work.

Conclusion

This paper reports on research conducted by BBC Media Action. The paper starts out by presenting an expert's view on evidence from Philip Davies, Head of 3ie, London. It then goes on to report best examples of evidence being used in practice and the gaps in evidence being felt by the stakeholders interviewed. The next two sections in the paper look at the processes, opportunities and challenges involved in building an evidence base, outlining some points to consider. Finally Section 5 presents a proposal on an evidence agenda for the sector to take this conversation forward.

An evidence-based conversation about the role of media for development is at its early stages, with some sectors like health communication leading our understanding of what the media can do, while others like governance and humanitarian response only beginning this task. If we are to move forward with an evidence-based conversation of what works and what does not work, we need to have:

1. Clearer standards for evaluation reporting
2. Greater investment in rigorous formative and summative evaluations and implementation research
3. Greater efforts to collate, comprehensively review and share the evidence that does exist
4. Appropriate fora to critique and understand research and evaluation findings

The core challenge we face

The interviews reported through this paper are very informative in exploring some of the inherent tensions, opportunities and structural boundaries around evidence creation. What is clear is the belief that media matters in development. What is equally clear is the noted level of frustration at the fact that this evidence conversation has been around for the last half-century and yet as practitioners we still do not seem to be able to take it forward collectively or cohesively. This is a

challenge for the practice of our sector, but there is an inherent risk that the evidence will be seen to be weak.

To address these issues the paper has proposed an evidence agenda to take this conversation forward. The agenda is a research question-based agenda, not focused on privileging particular methodologies or research approaches.

What (should) count(s) as evidence?

This breakdown of the issues helps us to choose the most appropriate measurement tools in our toolkit to look at media and communication, their functions and role in social and behavioural change. Starting with the social context and the understanding of the individual and their role in their societies, this would need to be qualitative, projective and exploratory in nature. Media landscape and media consumption data, along with attitudinal and value measurement, needs to be combined with quantitative research looking at effect sizes. Additionally, the use of more longitudinal research tracking outcomes over time would be valuable for both learning and evidence. Greater use of local, national or even regional quantitative and qualitative case studies over time will also enable comparison. Overall, what we are looking for is the balance of evidence mentioned earlier in the paper (Section 1).

The evidence agenda would need to have clear quality criteria of what counts as evidence and what does not count (is not sufficient) as evidence in the media for development sector. Based on the theory of change model and social change principles here is an initial suggestion of the top priorities for this agenda:

> **Quality criteria**
>
> - Theory of change
> - A clear measurable set of research questions
> - In-depth social understanding of the audience as the starting point
> - Local context based – using a social-ecological framework
> - Mixed methods
> - Transparent reporting on what works and what doesn't in the practice

We hope that this paper sets the agenda for our sector to move its evidence conversation forward. However, we are conscious that the interviewees do not represent the entire sector. In fact, these are a small group of stakeholders within the sector, mostly large-scale and global north partners. We are very keen to ensure that the next step in this conversation is to engage with three further groups. First, we look forward to engaging with government agencies, academics, think tanks and media practitioners in the global south and local and community-level media practitioners, learning more about the data they are collecting, sometimes at a much smaller scale, and their practice needs. Second, we are interested in the work going on with philanthropic organisations like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Knight Foundation. They are leading on some of the conversations around what counts as evidence and we are aware that we have a lot to learn from and share with each other. Finally, we welcome greater engagement and collaboration with academia to bridge theory and practice.

We expect that this engagement will affect and change some of the focus of the evidence agenda. We also expect to be challenged. What we have tried to do here is articulate a clear starting point, highlighting the risk of not taking this conversation forward, and also to propose a methodology for sectorial partners to participate in the evidence conversation and to influence it meaningfully, with their theories of change, data, evaluation and learning.

This report, and accompanying appendices, comprise a Working Paper in the BBC Media Action series: Bridging Theory and Practice. We welcome feedback as we consult on it. A final report will be published in late 2014 or early 2015.

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